

Earth Day is about recovering the environment and the economy

By Jane Lubchenco, Ph.D., the undersecretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere and administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

Forty years ago, the late Sen. Gaylord Nelson gave birth to Earth Day when he stood up for the environment, calling upon the American people to come together for a simple teach-in on the environment. The first Earth Day was a catalyst for change. It accelerated passage of the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act, as well as creation that same year of my agency, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and the Environmental Protection Agency.

Sen. Nelson knew that the environment and the economy are inseparable. Speaking about Earth Day, he said: "Increasingly, we have come to understand that the wealth of the nation is in its air, water, soil, forests, minerals, lakes, oceans, scenic beauty, wildlife habitats, and biodiversity. ... That's the whole economy. That's where all the economic activity and all the jobs come from."

Today, as we face the global challenges of climate change and an uncertain economy, this is as true as it was then. This Earth Day, NOAA is joining with Americans nationwide to celebrate how the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act is helping make immediate and long-term investments in the environmental and economic health and resiliency of our nation's coastal and Great Lakes communities.

A year ago, NOAA received \$167 million from the Recovery Act to invest in coastal habitat restoration. We selected 50 shovel-ready projects from 814 proposals worth \$3 billion. The message coastal communities sent to us was loud and clear: Our coastal wetlands and lake shores cannot wait. Our citizens are in need of work, and can do the job.

A year later, I can report that the Recovery Act is working from North Carolina to Seattle, from New England to Hawaii. We've broken ground on 30 projects and 20 will take off within the next three to eight months.

The projects are creating and supporting jobs for Americans who are building oyster reefs, restoring coral reefs and wetlands, taking down obsolete dams to restore fish passage and removing abandoned fishing gear that harms fish and mammals in our coastal waters.

Simon Rich, a contractor working on a project to restore oysters along the North Carolina coast, said the Recovery Act project allowed him to hire back many laid-off workers to build 49 acres of oyster reefs in Pamlico Sound.

Recovery Act projects that restore habitat make other long-term investments in a community's environmental and economic well-being. An oyster reef being built off the coast of Grand Isle, La. will serve as a natural breakwater to protect wetlands that buffer the effects of storms, sea-level rise and climate change. Dams removed to open fish passage on both the east and west coasts will provide better protection from floods because they remove barriers that can cause flood waters to pile up and threaten communities. Salmon, migratory birds and turtles are among a wide variety of threatened and endangered species that will be better off because of restoration work.

Americans and their families will also be better off. Restored saltmarshes, river bays and lakes increase opportunities for the public to enjoy walking, hiking, canoeing, fishing, bird watching and spending time with families.

This Earth Day, I encourage all Americans to go outdoors to see the habitat restoration taking place in your community. Habitat restoration is helping us recover our environment, recover our economy and recover our important connection to the Earth.

To learn more about the Recovery Act coastal restoration projects, please go to: NOAA Recovery Act:
<http://www.noaa.gov/recovery>

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